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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BASRAH 000059

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SUBJECT: (S) SADRIST IN BASRAH SEEKS USG AID TO REPLACE MOQTADA
AL-SADR

REF: BASRAH 51

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CLASSIFIED BY: Won Lee, A/Director, U.S. Regional Embassy
Office, Basrah, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (S/REL MCFI) SUMMARY: Mohammed al-Fariji, a Sadrism cleric in Basrah and representative of Ayatollah Qassim al-Ta'i, requested USG support in al-Ta'i's bid to lead the Sadrism Trend. Fariji noted that the Sadrists were deeply divided, upset with Moqtada al-Sadr's failure of leadership, and ready for a change. He argued that al-Ta'i was the best choice for replacing Moqtada, countering Iranian influence, and given the opportunity, Sadrists would rally to him. Fariji also criticized the GOI's continued opposition to the Sadrists in Basrah, which prevented Sadrism electoral participation and was driving Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) members into the arms of Iran. Though critical of the Strategic Framework and Status of Forces Agreement, Fariji urged the U.S. not to leave Iraq too early. Former MOD advisor, Majid al-Sari, provided additional background on al-Ta'i and Fariji. End Summary.

SADRISTS IN DISARRAY

12. (S/REL MCFI) The Regional Embassy Office (REO) and MNF-I's Force Strategic Engagement Cell met June 8 with Mohammed al-Fariji - a Sadrism cleric, OMS leader, and representative for Ayatollah Qassim al-Ta'i in five southern provinces. Majid al-Sari, the former Ministry of Defense adviser in Basrah who brokered our introduction to Fariji, also attended.

13. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji told us that the Sadrism Trend is currently fractured, unstructured, and lacks leadership. Faced with an uncertain future, some "old school" followers of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr (Moqtada al-Sadr's father) are waiting to see how events unfold. Other Sadrists believe they have reached a "dead end" forcing them to choose between cooperation with America or Iran. Fariji said he and al-Ta'i prefer working with the U.S., which is why they agreed to engage us, despite risking their lives and reputations.

LOOKING FOR NEW LEADERSHIP

14. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji explained that the Sadrists have looked to either Ayatollah Mohammed al-Yacoubi or Moqtada for guidance since the death of Sadiq al-Sadr. But, he argued neither is a

viable option to lead them through their current morass. Yacoubi weakened the Sadrism Trend by splitting it to form the Fadhlila Party and upsetting those in the movement who want a single religious authority. Furthermore, perceptions of Fadhlila corruption have tainted Yacoubi's credentials.

¶15. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji found Moqtada equally unfit to lead and blamed him for OMS's downfall. Moqtada, he said, made bad decisions and stubbornly refused advice. Fariji intimated that there were rumors in Sadrism circles that Moqtada was ill. He pointed out that by hiding in Iran, Moqtada was viewed within the movement as weak and under Iran's influence. As Fariji put it, "Moqtada sold Iraq to Iran" adding that "if Moqtada returned as an Ayatollah, Iraq is doomed. We have to preempt that by supporting someone else."

AL-TA'I IS OUR MAN

¶16. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji argued that the current "situation needs to be manipulated" to elevate someone to replace Moqtada as the head of the movement. Al-Ta'i, he said, is "the only person left out there who can lead" because he is not "contaminated by politics", is a Shia Arab nationalist who would counter Iranian religious influence in Najaf's hawza, and is known and trusted by the majority of OMS. All it would take for the Sadrists to coalesce around al-Ta'i, Fariji said, was increased media attention.

¶17. (S/REL MCFI) According to Fariji, al-Ta'i has been implementing a plan to strengthen his position since 2003 and is proceeding with or without the Coalition. However, Fariji asked for U.S. assistance to "accelerate" al-Ta'i's plans by: 1) arranging an interview for al-Ta'i on either al-Hurra or al-Arabiya television, and 2) facilitating a publicized meeting between al-Ta'i and someone like President Jalal Talabani or CoR Speaker Mashadani. If the U.S. took these "two steps," Fariji

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promised he would go "five steps" in return. If we failed, however, he threatened this would be our last meeting. Embassy Baghdad's guidance is requested.

OMS ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION DOUBTFUL

¶18. (S/REL MCFI) In response to our query, Fariji said that participating in future elections was currently a "red-line." Like our previous meeting, Fariji claimed that the GOI's anti-militia operations are solely directed against the Sadrists to eliminate them as an electoral threat to ISCI/Badr. In such a politically charged environment, OMS participation is a near impossibility. Fariji lamented that Sadrism candidates would immediately be arrested for registering. Even Basrah's new OMS leader, Hassan Hussein, feared public appearances, he said. For the time being, Basrah's OMS was mostly concerned with re-opening their office and holding prayers. Asked if OMS would participate given a change in the environment, Fariji responded, "Only time will tell."

IRAN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE

¶19. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji was extremely concerned that JAM members continued to fall under Iran's influence. Fariji said that he and other clerics urged JAM cell leaders not to attack Basrah Air Station and give the Coalition time to perform development work. Unfortunately, cell leaders like Ali al-Bazooni and Hassan al-Duraji were too young, uneducated, and easily recruited by Iran. Like many JAM members, they fled to Iran during Charge of the Knights. Now they were broke, unable to return and increasingly beholden to Tehran.

¶110. (S/REL MCFI) Majid al-Sari and Fariji told us that JAM members in Iran were being trained how to launch rockets from four-man, armored fast boats manufactured by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in Muhamarah. Fariji added that if the GOI allowed them to return, he would find them civilian jobs and ensure they lived peacefully. (Note: Iran similarly turned Iraqi

refugees into proxy fighters like Badr Corps and Sayyid al-Shuhada following the 1991 Shia uprising. End note).

WE DON'T LIKE THE SOFA, BUT DON'T LEAVE...YET

¶11. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji was critical of the Strategic Agreement and the Status of Forces Agreement (SA/SOFA) when we sought his views. He predictably claimed it violates Iraqi sovereignty, but he appeared ill informed about what the SA/SOFA represent. We tried to allay his concerns, but he remained unconvinced. Despite this, Fariji urged the U.S. not to leave Iraq; to do so meant handing it over to Iran. If that happened, Iraqis would despise America for centuries.

NO MEETINGS WITH AL-TA'I & UK INVOLVEMENT REJECTED

¶12. (S/REL MCFI) Fariji told us that al-Ta'i was not disposed to meeting with the Coalition right now, when we expressed an interest. For the time being, Fariji said that he was the appropriate contact as al-Ta'i's representative. Fariji also opposed our suggestion to include UK Coalition members at future meetings. He criticized the British forces for mismanaging southern Iraq, suspected HMG's agenda, and claimed that the UK frequently compromised their interlocutors. He claimed that the British have already approached him, but he rejected their advances. (Note: We will continue to encourage Fariji to include the UK in future meetings. End note.)

MAJID AL-SARI ON FARIJI AND AL-TA'I

¶13. (S/REL MCFI) Majid al-Sari, in a separate meeting on June 9, told us that mainstream meetings with the Sadrists requires a "green light" from the OMS political committee. That said, breakaway factions like al-Ta'i's can continue to meet the Coalition in secret. Al-Sari characterized al-Ta'i as "dangerous" not in terms as a threat to CF because he is willing to open a dialogue with Americans, but because he is intelligent, an opportunist, and a serious player. When asked what al-Ta'i's chances of success were for replacing Moqtada, al-Sari said that al-Ta'i only lacks the opportunity and a little support.

¶14. (S/REL MCFI) Al-Sari also disclosed that his and Fariji's mothers are related, which is how they know each other. Al-Sari noted that up to now, Fariji had little responsibility in

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Basrah's OMS, but appears to have gained in stature post-Charge of the Knights, is well informed on Najaf's secret deals, and disliked by some Moqtada followers given his ties to al-Ta'i. According to al-Sari, Fariji may have disingenuously stated al-Ta'i would not meet us in order to maintain his role as al-Ta'i's gatekeeper. Al-Sari also said that Hassan Hussein, the new OMS leader in Basrah, is a secret supporter of al-Ta'i.

COMMENT

¶15. (S/REL MCFI) Al-Ta'i's support within the Sadrist Trend is currently unknown and more information will be required to assess whether he is as serious a player as Fariji makes him to be. According to British sources in Basrah, little is known about al-Ta'i, though there are some indications that he may have had an affiliation with Yacoubi's Fadhila Party. If true, it contradicts Fariji's apparent disdain for Fadhila.
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